

The Denver Post
March 26, 2005

The Broader Value of CAFTA

In two weeks, Congress starts debating a treaty that will shape America's future role in our hemisphere. Since lawmakers previously gave President Bush "fast track" authority to negotiate the pact, lawmakers can't change any provisions in the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) - they can only vote yes or no. We think that vote should be yes.

CAFTA is modeled on free trade deals Congress OK'd a decade ago with Mexico and Canada, in 2000 with Jordan and in 2004 with Morocco. CAFTA would eliminate trade barriers on most goods and services and encourage commerce among the United States, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

The issue splits Colorado's congressional delegation. Leaning in favor of it are Republican Reps. Bob Beauprez of metro suburbs and Marilyn Musgrave of the Eastern Plains. Leaning against it are Democratic Reps. Mark Udall of Boulder and John Salazar of the Western Slope. Undecided are Democrats Sen. Ken Salazar and Rep. Diana DeGette of Denver, and Republican Reps. Joel Hefley of Colorado Springs and Tom Tancredo of the metro suburbs. Sen. Wayne Allard, a Republican, declined comment.

Colorado's sugar beet farmers oppose CAFTA because they say it will let cheap, subsidized sugar flood U.S. markets. While concerns may be understandable, Congress shouldn't let one industry decide U.S. hemispheric policy.

The real arguments in favor of CAFTA involve global issues and the future of our hemisphere's small democracies. Central America will never rival U.S. economic clout - but China is trying. CAFTA could help the Western Hemisphere better position itself to compete with China's burgeoning industries, Central American leaders say.

As a tool that can help rebuild Central America's struggling economies, CAFTA also has a political dimension. Although Costa Rica has been a stable democracy for more than a half century, its neighbors endured dictatorships, civil wars and insurgencies through the 1990s.

Central America's democracies are still fragile, and its governments need to show their impoverished people there's a hope for a brighter future. CAFTA is one tool to nurture that hope.

U.S. foreign policy interests would be well-served by helping to build prosperity and freedom among all the nations in our hemisphere.